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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 007971

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: MARINES MAKE MAJOR DRUG SEIZURES, BUT SUFFER
FUNDING SHORTFALLS

REF: BOGOTA 1158

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Operating in difficult terrain, Colombian Marine units accounted for 20% of Colombian cocaine seizures in January-October 2007 (nearly 20 metric tons). Beyond fighting drugs, Marines participated in counterguerrilla offensives, manned river checkpoints and patrols, safeguarded shipping, and patrolled river borders. They also engaged in missions against FARC high-value targets and protected the main Pacific port of Buenaventura. Still, Marine riverine forces are undermanned -- with half of billets empty in most units -- and under resourced by their Navy parent. The end of U.S. funding for fuel for Marine riverine operations on October 1 brought much of their vital counterdrug operations to an abrupt halt. End summary.

Interdiction Results

¶2. (C) The Colombian Police, Army, and Navy contribute to the counterdrug effort at various stages of cocaine production from leaf to powder. Year-to-date figures (below) show the Army and Police have a joint lead on coca leaf interdiction, a result of their operations to destroy coca fields. The Marines and Army both seize intermediate drugs (paste and base in process) during destruction of rural labs and caches. Seizures of cocaine are led by the Police (45 percent), followed by Navy units (mainly Coast Guard - 32 percent) and the Marines (20 percent), intercepting drugs in transit by sea, river, and land routes, and in HCl labs and caches. In addition to their own operations, riverine units play a vital role in transporting Army troops upriver to launch land-based counterdrug operations.

Drug Interdiction by Armed Service
(Year to date, to mid-October 2007;
in metric tons and *gallons)

Other	Marine
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Substance	Police	Army	Marines	Naval	Component
Coca leaf	351	429	85	15	10 percent
In process*	-	56	55	7	47 percent
Base	15	8	2	4	5 percent
Cocaine	43	3	20	30	20 percent

Source: Colombian Drug Observatory (Vice Presidency)

Pacific Coast -- Main Drug Outlet

13. (C) A majority of Colombian cocaine is smuggled from the Pacific coast, and Marine interdiction results are concentrated there. Six riverine battalions distributed along the west coast -- two in Choco (Bahia Solano), two at Valle de Cauca (Buenaventura), one in Cauca (Guapi), and one near Ecuador in Narino (Tumaco) -- accounted for 98 percent of cocaine, 83 percent of paste, 74-86 percent of various precursor chemicals, and 82 percent of coca leaf seized by riverine units this year. Interdiction and destruction statistics reveal patterns of drug production and transport. The Narino and Cauca units capture greater quantities of coca leaf, precursor chemicals, and coca paste, since coca fields are concentrated in the south. In contrast, finished cocaine and marijuana are seized in greater volumes in the Choco, closer to destination markets and where law enforcement infrastructure is scarcest.

Security: FARC, Commerce, and Borders

14. (C) The twelve Marine riverine battalions and two joint elements are strategically situated on major waterways and river networks, with duties that range far beyond fighting drugs. Marines play a critical role in the main effort against the FARC in La Macarena, with a battalion in Caqueta (Tres Esquinas) complementing two smaller riverine elements of Joint Task Force Omega (JTF-O) in Tres Esquinas and Guaviare (Barrancon). These forces combat FARC fighters and destroy camps and arms caches in joint operations with the Army and/or Air Force.

15. (C) Riverine forces also man river checkpoints and patrols, safeguarding legal commerce and cutting supply lines of illegal armed groups and narcos. In the northwest, a coastal unit at Antioquia (Turbo) near Panama patrols the traditional smuggling route of the Rio Atrato between the Caribbean and Pacific. The Magdalena River (Colombia's principal north-south shipping route) is manned by a battalion based in Bolivar (Yati), which escorts tankers from inland oil terminals at Barrancabermeja to protect them from piracy. Riverine patrols prevent the FARC from blocking or extorting transport, and its checkpoints intercept boats bringing supplies of food and munitions to illegal groups.

16. (C) Marines are responsible for securing Colombia's river borders, and they play a critical role in intercepting arms and explosives entering Colombia from Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama. On the Rio Putumayo, a battalion in Putumayo (Puerto Leguizamo) reported good coordination with Peruvian counterparts but poor communication with Ecuadorians. Peruvian forces have assisted GOC offensives and provided blocking forces on their side of the river. The two countries held joint operations to provide medical services to both sides' indigenous populations. Two Marine units on the Venezuela border -- in Vichada (Puerto Carreno) on the Rio Orinoco and Guainia (Puerto Inirida) on the Rio Inirida -- fought emerging criminal groups and cross-border smuggling.

Big Duties, with Insufficient Resources

17. (C) The Marines total 23,000, including 8,400 personnel dedicated to riverine operations. Most Marines are deployed on land duty in the Montes de Maria (Sucre/Bolivar), the main Pacific port of Buenaventura, and in urban special forces engaged in high-value target (HVT) and other priority operations against the FARC. In the eight regular riverine battalions (totaling 6,338 men), only 49 percent of billets are filled (32 percent of officers, 71 percent of conscripts). The four riverine assault battalions (1,543 men) are oversupplied with regular conscripts (169 percent), exacerbating problems caused by shortages of officers and NCOs (66 and 77 percent) Only riverine units engaged in JTF-Omega are fully staffed.

18. (C) Under staffing is symptomatic of the general neglect of the Marines by the parent Colombian Navy. Although Marines constitute about 80 percent of Navy personnel, Navy leadership has been dominated by 'blue water' surface officers. Budgets have historically been tilted towards big-ticket Navy assets for conventional warfare, to the detriment of riverine forces fighting against narcos and the FARC. With U.S. support declining, the Marines face major operational difficulties. When U.S. fuel funding ended on October 1 to all Marine units outside the Omega area, nearly all riverine operations halted pending future budget decisions by the Colombian Navy.

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